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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 SANAA 001648

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FOR NEA/ARP AMACDONALD AND INR SMOFFAT

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TAGS: [MCAP](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [YM](#)
SUBJECT: ANOTHER HALF-HEARTED CEASEFIRE IN SA'ADA; FIGHTING
CONTINUES

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. The sixth war in Sa'ada shows no sign of slowing, despite another brief ceasefire announcement on September 4. The ongoing war of words between the ROYG and Houthis is resulting in a dizzying see-saw of accusations and counter-accusations, none of them independently verifiable. Relief agencies struggle to provide food, water, medicines, and other essential supplies to 150,000 civilians displaced by the conflict. Landlines in Sa'ada governorate have now been cut, making it even more difficult to assess the situation on the ground or plan for relief efforts. The ROYG continues to accuse Iran of meddling in the conflict, while various sources allege that the Saudi government is providing significant financial and material support to the ROYG in its fight against the Houthis. None of the ceasefire declarations issued by the ROYG or the Houthis in recent weeks reflects a serious attempt to address a worsening humanitarian crisis. While both parties appear committed to continue fighting through the holy month of Ramadan, Post will continue to advocate for a humanitarian corridor and greater access for relief workers and journalists. END SUMMARY.

EXCHANGE OF FIRE, EXCHANGE OF ACCUSATIONS

¶2. (S/NF) Now into its fourth week)- and more than halfway through the holy month of Ramadan)- the sixth war in Sa'ada shows no sign of slowing, with intense fighting in Malaheet (Sa'ada governorate), Harf Sufyan (Amran governorate), and Sa'ada City itself. DATT contacts report that the Houthis continue to hold their entrenched areas and make excellent use of the mountainous terrain. The army is suffering setbacks and losing territory, pulling back towards Sa'ada City, multiple sources have told EmbOffs. A second Republican Guard unit)- typically kept in reserve to protect the regime in Sana'a -- was deployed to Sa'ada between August 30 and September 1. The Yemeni Air Force (YAF) is flying airframes around the clock; crew are showing signs of severe fatigue. In addition to the YAF's ongoing resupply and casualty evacuation missions, its entire 8th Brigade is conducting a mission to take control of a hill near the Sa'ada airport. (Comment: Significant collateral damage and increasing numbers of IDPs are likely to result from such a mission, given the YAF's lack of precision strike capability and tactics that involve indiscriminately bombing areas where it believes Houthis to be. End Comment.) Casualty rates are still a mystery, with no conclusive reporting from either the media or the ROYG. Al-Arabiya satellite channel reported that 40 people were killed on September 6 during clashes between the army and the Houthis; it also reported that a mass grave of 15 Houthis was discovered near the Sa'ada Central Prison in early September.

¶3. (C) The ongoing war of words between the ROYG and Houthis is resulting in a dizzying see-saw of accusations and counter-accusations, none of them possible to be independently verified given the lack of access to the region by journalists and relief workers. On September 3, the Ministry of Defense-owned daily 26 September reported that the Houthis executed six women and 10 children in Thwaib (Sa'ada governorate) in retaliation for their cooperation with the government; the Houthis denied the allegations, dismissing them as "ridiculous." As a result, frustrated observers have little idea about what is really happening in Sa'ada.

UNCLEAR CEASEFIRE

¶4. (SBU) According to official Saba news, the ROYG announced that, beginning at 21:00 on Friday, September 4, it would suspend military operations against the Houthis in Sa'ada and Amran. On September 5, the Supreme Security Committee announced that the Houthis violated the ceasefire by launching attacks in Malaheet and Harf Sufyan just four hours after it took effect. (Comment: Although some media described the ceasefire as a truce, it appears to have been unilateral. End Comment.) According to Nabil Othman, UNHCR Deputy Representative, relief organizations learned of the ceasefire only after the fact through the media. It was not until 22:30 on September 4)- the night the ceasefire was declared by the ROYG and reported in the media)- that UNHCR received a call from the office of the ROYG coordinator for humanitarian assistance convening a meeting the next day to

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discuss delivering humanitarian aid. But because clashes resumed within a few hours, relief agencies) which are "on standby to send aid," according to Othman) were not able to spring into action.

CIVILIANS SUFFER WITH LITTLE ACCESS TO AID

¶5. (SBU) The estimated number of IDPs remains around 150,000. Roughly half of them are children, and of those, 70 percent are girls. UNHCR has been running one IDP camp in Harad (Hajja governorate) for about three weeks now. They are providing aid to about 300 families inside the camp as well as families who have chosen to remain outside. They are establishing another IDP camp in Khaiwan (Amran governorate). (Note: As Khaiwan is only 20 kilometers from the fighting in Harf Sufyan, the UNHCR expressed concerns to the ROYG, but the ROYG assured the UNHCR that they would ensure the IDPs' safety. End Note.) They are raising tents and should begin to receive families and distribute non-food items early next week. The UNHCR is conducting a fact-finding mission in the area near the Saudi border to assess the situation. They have two options for providing assistance to the IDPs assembling there. The first is to conduct a UN relief convoy from Harad north through the Saudi border that would circle back down into Yemen. While the UNHCR waits for the ROYG and Saudi governments to agree, they are pursuing the second option, which is for the UNHCR office in Riyadh to provide aid to the IDPs directly from Saudi Arabia. They are coordinating with Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), which is also aiding IDPs near the Saudi border, to avoid duplication. Othman reports "no problems" from the Saudi government regarding that option.

¶6. (SBU) Landlines in Sa'ada governorate have now been cut, making it even more difficult to assess the situation on the ground or plan for relief efforts. (Note: The ROYG has been blocking most mobile phone service since the fighting began. End Note.) UNHCR has been unable to communicate with its one Sa'ada-based staff member or its local implementing partner for the past three days. Official media reported on September 7 that the landlines are down because the Houthis

shelled a communications tower in Sa'ada. UNHCR's Othman, however, told PolOff on September 9 that the ROYG cut the landlines. He said that the UNHCR requested that the government unblock a few of their telephone numbers in order to coordinate aid efforts with their Sa'ada partners, but has yet to receive a response.

ALLEGATIONS OF REGIONAL INVOLVEMENT

¶7. (S/NF) The ROYG continues to accuse Iran of meddling in the conflict. In a September 8 interview on al-Jazeera satellite channel, President Saleh alleged that unnamed Iranian parties support the Houthis financially and otherwise. Meanwhile, various sources alleged that the Saudi government is providing significant financial support to the ROYG in its fight against the Houthis. In August, Houthi media outlets said that Saudi forces had participated in airstrikes in Sa'ada, a claim that remains unconfirmed. On September 7, independent al-Masdar Online reported that Yemeni military units are assembling on the Saudi side of the border, "paving the way for a ground invasion into all the areas controlled by the Houthis." (Note: Post has not been able to confirm that allegation. End Note.) The Houthis posted a video on youtube.com showing weapons they allegedly captured from the ROYG, including munitions bearing a Saudi emblem. The Houthis released a statement on September 8 claiming that the Saudi-origin munitions are proof of "direct Saudi support (for the ROYG) that we have talked about." (Comment: These weapons are not convincing evidence of direct Saudi support for the ROYG's fight against the Houthis. The Saudis, like the U.S., have a security assistance program in Yemen, which likely includes the sale or transfer of weapons and munitions to the ROYG. End Comment.)

COMMENT

¶8. (C) In recent weeks, both the ROYG and the Houthis have unilaterally declared humanitarian ceasefires. These declarations appear to be political posturing aimed at showing how little the other side)- which predictably violates the unilateral decree to suspend the fighting --

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cares for civilians caught in the cross-fire. They may also have been tactical attempts to regroup veiled as humanitarian gestures. What is clear, however, is that they were not/not serious attempts to address a worsening humanitarian crisis. In addition to its unilateral nature, the latest ceasefire's alleged humanitarian aims were further called into question by the fact that it occurred at night-time, without detailed terms (such as how long it would last and where it would be in effect), and without any coordination with relief agencies until hours after it went into effect. Both sides have also announced their willingness to work with the UN to allow the flow of aid to IDPs, yet neither appears to be doing the hard work to make it happen. Aid agencies are ready to take advantage of any genuine ceasefire agreed to by both parties, if only for a few hours, to deliver much-needed aid to desperate IDPs. However, as UNHCR Representative Claire Bourgeois told PolOff on August 30, the chances of a humanitarian ceasefire are small because "there is no confidence at all" between the ROYG and the Houthis. Yet it is the only hope for some relief for the desperate and fearful civilian population. Post will continue to urge both parties to permit a humanitarian corridor, press the ROYG to open telephone communications for relief agencies, and encourage the ROYG to allow journalists to travel to Sa'ada.
END COMMENT.

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